

Rev. Kimberly Glenn

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is about a landowner who owns a vineyard. Apparently, this landowner was a working landowner, not one who just lived off of the profits from the vineyard. We've been learning in the Adult Forum in Magill that the economy in Jesus' day was agrarian. Marcus Borg labels it "an agrarian dominance society." He meant that the economy was built on agriculture, like vineyards, olive tree farms and wheat fields. The social structure that operated the economy was one of domination. The upper levels of society dominated the lower levels of society. Landowners dominated laborers, Kings dominated landowners, and so on. Everyone at that time believed that the social status into which they were born had been ordained by God. Kings were born to be kings and paupers were born to be paupers. The people really believed that those at the top were given their special social status by God. But that didn't mean they liked it. In fact, they were pretty rebellious about it.

Now consider with me the parable from Matthew's gospel we just heard through the lens of that agrarian society. As I've mentioned before, Jesus used parables to teach his followers about larger and more profound truths. Through familiar situations Jesus revealed aspects of God's nature that were not otherwise apparent. The story he told in this parable made sense to his followers. They could instantly relate to it. Maybe you can, too.

In this parable, a landowner goes into a village to hire day laborers for his vineyard. This would have been a common economic transaction in first century Israel. It's a rare but not unfamiliar transaction in our twenty-first century economy. The truth

to which Jesus was pointing, though, had less to do with the economy of the first century and more to do with God's economy.

What, you may wonder, is God's economy? The term "God's economy" is thrown around quite a bit in seminary but I imagine many of you have never heard of it. I know my editor, aka my husband, had never heard of it. God's economy, as I am interpreting it here, is the view of how the world and all its pieces and parts work together. A picture of "God's economy" can be gleaned from the descriptions that Jesus gave us. We can put together bits of scripture where Jesus tells us what God's kingdom *is like*, as in God's kingdom *is like* a vineyard. When put together all those bits of scripture, we picture a kingdom where all is just, all is equitable; where there are no divisions between people, where compassion and mercy prevail.

Compare that image of God's economy to the economy presented in the parable. The parable tells us that the landowner went to the market early in the morning to hire workers for the day. He picked up a wagon load and drove the out to the vineyard. They mutually agreed on the usual daily wage. He drove back to the market a little later for more laborers. We do not know why he didn't hire all he needed on his first trip, but maybe he could only hold so many people in his wagon. The laborers he hired on the second trip were just as able and hungry for work as the first group he hired. He agreed to pay them what was right. He continued making trips to the market for more laborers until he had hired all he could possibly hire in a day. Each group of them was as able and hungry for work as the last. The last group hired with only one hour left to work in the field was grateful to finally be hired.

But then the landowner made an odd decision. He decided to pay the laborers in reverse order. He called all of them in at the end of the work day and distributed their wages from the last group who were hired down to the first. When he paid the last group the day's wage they received it gratefully. But when he paid the group he had hired at dawn the same wage that he paid the group that he hired at 5 o'clock. they balked. They were annoyed. And if we understand this parable through the lens of our worldly economy their reaction would seem rational. I think we can all identify with their grumbling. Those who went into the vineyard first had put in long hours in the hot sun. Those who arrived last missed the heat of the day and barely broke a sweat.

But if we try to understand this parable differently, looking at it through the lens of God's economy, we can sense that grumbling about a difference in wages would seem to be a greedy response; it would be a reaction based on envy and resentment.

You see in God's economy, people work just because it is the good thing to do - *not* because they hope to earn a reward. In God's economy, in the world He desires for us, people desire work just because human bodies are designed for it. In God's economy, the laborers would not grumble about being shorted in their wages lest they whip up a lot of negative energy. In God's economy no one would compare the size of the reward each group received. Instead, they would focus on the benefit of having been in the field at all; they would rejoice in having been given work to do and not left like the others to be idle.

God's economy is clearly not the economy of the world today. But it might be the economy that God desires for us. God has always been calling, and continues to call, God's people into new things, into new ways of looking at things, new ways of

being. In this parable, we are being asked to see that some of us might hear God's call at dawn and some of us at noon and some of us at the end of the day. But to God, it doesn't matter *when* we hear the call. It only matters *that* we hear the call to adopt the ideals of God's economy. Jesus revealed to us that God sought to fashion a new people through Him; a new order of people who would not be bound by the ideals of the worldly economy; a new order of people who would adhere to God's dream for us of justice, compassion, equity and mercy. When we hear God's call to us we begin to become that new order of people.

Paul says it best, in Christ there is no male or female, no slave or free, no Greek or Jew. God sees us all the same. There are no worldly statuses that set us apart in God's eyes. In God's eyes we are all equal. The heads of state are equal to the homeless. The CEOs are equal to the cab drivers. The women are equal to the men. All races of people are the same in God's eyes. This parable reveals to us a God who looks at us through eyes of justice, compassion and mercy. It invites us to see each other just as God sees us. It invites us to let go of the social divisions, bias and hatred that we have allowed to develop between each other. It invites us to empty ourselves of envy and judgment and allow ourselves to be filled with the joy for life that God intends.

In this parable we are told that the last will be first and the first will be last. God's will for us is that his kingdom will prevail. Our prayer continues to be for God's will to be done and for God's kingdom to come.

As we pray together today, may we all pray that it will be so.